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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000724

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP/PMBS AND INR/EAP
USAID FOR DOWNEY

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR EAID SOCI RP

SUBJECT: GRP PREPARES FOR AUGUST ELECTIONS IN MINDANAO AND MOVES FORWARD WITH ELECTORAL REFORM PLANS

REF: A. MANILA 682

1B. MANILA 646
1C. 04 MANILA 6032
1D. 04 MANILA 4416
1E. 04 MANILA 185

11. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please handle accordingly.

12. (SBU) Summary: Executive branch and Commission on Elections (COMELEC) sources confirm that regional assembly (ARMM) elections in Mindanao are on track to take place in August 2005. Nationwide neighborhood (barangay) elections slated for later this year are likely to be postponed until at least May 2007. In the meantime, COMELEC has sent a comprehensive report to Congress recommending several possible amendments to existing law in support of long-standing electoral reform efforts. These proposals are likely to face in-depth legislative scrutiny later in 2005.

13. (SBU) Summary (Continued): COMELEC seems to recognize that it must move forward expeditiously in order to reform a system that showed serious signs of strain during the May 2004 elections. Mission continues to underscore support for the reform effort via political outreach and via the USG-funded Consortium for Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) project. End Summary.

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ARMM Election Plans
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14. (SBU) COMELEC Chairman Benjamin Abalos described the status of his organization's 2005 agenda in a wide-ranging February 14 discussion with Acting Polcouns and poloff. Abalos was optimistic that the planned elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) will take place on August 8, 2005. (Note: Elections for governor, vice governor and the regional legislative council are slated to take place at this time. The last ARMM elections occurred in November 2001. They were scheduled to take place in November 2004, but were postponed due to budgetary constraints. See Ref D.) In a February 11 meeting with Acting Polcouns, Gabriel Claudio, a key political adviser to President Arroyo, confirmed that the ARMM elections look set to take place in August. He asserted that recent fighting on Jolo Island in the Sulu Archipelago (Ref A) and periodic flare-ups in other parts of the ARMM would &almost certainly not impact8 the date of the election.

15. (SBU) Abalos related that approximately 20,000 new voters had already registered for the upcoming election and that COMELEC was moving forward with voter registration drives throughout the five ARMM provinces. In doing this, each regional COMELEC office was using computerized biometric registration procedures in order to create a more secure and accessible centralized voter registry. Abalos said the biometric system had allowed COMELEC to cleanse the list of over 100,000 duplicate registrants in the ARMM area (where there are just over one million registered voters total). COMELEC hoped these procedures -- along with the use of automated counting machines -- would lead to confidence in the integrity of the election results in the ARMM.

16. (SBU) When queried about the automated counting machines, Abalos replied that COMELEC had filed a motion with the Supreme Court in December 2004 to request permission to deploy some machines to the ARMM for the election. (Note: The machines, which were purchased at great cost, were impounded when the Supreme Court ruled that the COMELEC contract to purchase the machines was illegal -- Ref E. The machines were not used in the May 2004 elections.) Abalos commented that COMELEC "hoped very much the automated machines could be used because they are doing no good locked in a warehouse.8 He was not sure how or when the Supreme Court would ultimately decide the issue, however.

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Postponing Barangay Elections

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17. (SBU) Abalos confirmed reports that the neighborhood (barangay) elections currently scheduled for October 2005 would most likely be rescheduled for May 2007 when they could be held at the same time as national mid-term elections. He noted that the reasons for postponing the elections include a lack of GRP funds to hold them. The barangay elections are the lowest level of retail politics in the Philippines, wherein citizens from 41,974 barangays nationwide elect a total of nearly 350,000 local political officials. The current crop of incumbent barangay officials were elected on July 16, 2002, for three-year terms supposed to end this year.

18. (SBU) Claudio told Acting Polcouns that he expected Malacanang and the legislative branches to focus fully on the barangay elections issue once the current debate over fiscal reforms concluded (see Ref B). Claudio said he thought that all sides would ultimately agree that the barangay polls should take place as part of the mid-term elections in 2007.

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COMELEC's "Wish List"
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19. (SBU) Abalos said COMELEC had recently sent a comprehensive report to the House and the Senate listing its key electoral reform priorities. COMELEC expected many of the reforms to be incorporated into a revised omnibus election code bill that it hoped would be signed into law in late 2005 or early 2006. Top priorities include the following:

-- The granting of COMELEC's December 2004 motion filed with the Supreme Court concerning use of automated counting machines during the upcoming ARMM elections (as mentioned above in paras 4 and 5);

-- An amendment to allow the electronic transmittal of returns containing election results. This amendment is meant to facilitate a more rapid calculation of voting results and is designed to allow for the electronic transmittal of results calculated by the counting machines;

-- An amendment requiring all voters to register for the May 2007 elections using the new biometric registration process. Voters not re-registered using this process would be barred from voting;

-- An amendment forcing candidates standing for elected office to automatically resign from any currently-held elected position; and,

-- An amendment to remove municipal and barangay-level electoral protest proceedings from COMELEC's jurisdiction. According to Abalos, electoral complaints at these lower levels had created too many administrative bottlenecks for COMELEC. Such cases could be dealt with better by local-level courts.

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Comment
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110. (SBU) COMELEC seems to recognize that it must move forward expeditiously in order to reform a system that showed serious signs of strain during the May 2004 elections. Its "wish list" directly seeks to address many of the key problems that afflicted the May 2004 elections: nationwide confusion with the voter registration lists; slow counting due to the use of antiquated manual counting procedures; and an overload of election protests that consumed much of COMELEC's limited resources.

111. (SBU) Comment (Continued): Mission continues to underscore support for the reform effort via political outreach and via the USG-funded Consortium for Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) project. As reviewed in Reftels, the current phase of the CEPPS project involves helping build the organizational and technological capacity of COMELEC and concerned NGO's through the provision of technical assistance and targeted training. These efforts are focused in the first instance on assisting the GRP conduct smooth elections in the ARMM later this year.

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